



5 myths

about elephant rides and shows



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Contrary to what is often claimed, and largely unknown, there is a brutal reality behind the use of elephants as tourist attractions. This involves separating young elephants from their mothers; a traumatic breaking-in and training process and then continual ill-treatment of adult elephants to make them perform. Here we refute five of the common myths about elephants used for rides and shows.

Myth 1: Elephants are domesticated animals

Elephants are not domesticated. They are wild animals in captivity that need to be tamed and trained in order to be 'safely' used for rides and shows. Domesticated animals such as dogs, cows and horses have been selectively bred by humans for many generations to have particular physical characteristics and behaviours. This is not the case with elephants.

When elephants are described as domesticated, it leads people to believe that the animal has lost its wild instincts and adapted to life in human company just like dogs or horses. But even if born in captivity, they remain wild animals.

All elephants used for riding and performing need to be 'broken' at a young age in order to accept human control. By the time you come to ride an elephant, it may look at peace; but this is because its spirit has been broken.

The breaking of the spirit, also called *Phajaan* or

crushing, is exceptionally cruel. It involves physical restraints and withholding food and water. And in many cases, severe pain is inflicted to speed up the process.

This breaking-in is intended to permanently establish human dominance over the elephant. Footage of the breaking-in of newly captured elephants, shows them enduring severe abuse, extreme stress and pain. Even if these disturbing reports are hopefully the exception, the breaking-in process remains an intensely stressful event for wild-caught and captive-born animals.

Bullhooks are the most common tools used by elephant trainers or mahouts. They usually have sharp metal hooks at the end and are used on the sensitive areas of the elephant's skin to force obedience with 'push and pull' commands. This technique permanently reminds the animal of human dominance. Coercion and fear are the principles by which an elephant in the tourism industry is tamed.



Myth 2: There are responsible elephant rides

There are simply no responsible elephant rides or shows. An elephant is a large and strong animal in comparison to humans. Consequently, the breaking-in process of elephants for any type of ride or performance requires severe physical and psychological abuse. Furthermore, their physical well-being is forever damaged by the jobs they are forced to do.

Elephants may be strong and able to pull thousands of kilos, but their backs are not built for heavy loads. The saddle and the weight of passengers can cause pain and injuries. They are also not physically built to

stand on their hind legs as they do in shows. These tricks are only performed because of being trained through pain and fear.

Most elephants are chained for long periods between shows and rides, very often in isolation. This causes them great stress and results in unnatural behaviours such as 'weaving' where they compulsively move their heads from side to side. Elephants are intelligent and social herd animals. In the elephant entertainment industry, their complex social needs cannot be met.

Myth 3: Keeping elephants in captivity ensures the conservation of elephants in the wild

Keeping elephants for tourism in fact damages their conservation status. Reproduction rates of elephants in captivity are extremely low and do not meet the demand for new elephants in the tourism industry. Consequently, elephants are poached from the wild to fuel tourist entertainment. This is considered a major threat to the wild Asian elephant population, which has declined dramatically over the last century.

An investigation by TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, found that between 2011 and 2013 at

least 79 elephants in Thailand were illegally captured for sale into the tourism industry. Most of these were born in neighbouring Myanmar.

Capturing elephants from the wild is a brutal activity for which pit traps are used. There are also increasing reports of killing protective mothers and aunts of the young elephants. The calves are then smuggled across the border from Myanmar to Thailand for use in the tourism industry where a young elephant can fetch approximately 33,000 USD.



Myth 4: Elephants in the tourist industry come from the logging industry

Until 1989, elephants in Thailand were largely used in the logging industry, however a state-wide ban on commercial forestry left many elephant owners without a source of income. The tourism industry became a prime opportunity for those elephant owners to earn a living.

But nearly a quarter of a century after the banning of logging, these elephants are now old or have died. Consequently, the number of elephants used today should have decreased, but this is not the case. The

number of tourism venues with elephant has actually grown, while it is estimated that the number of captive elephants has remained stable. The animals that are now used in these venues are not old working animals, but many are captured from the wild or bred in captivity to spend their lives in chains.

Across Asia it is estimated that as many as 75% of the adult elephants, used for tourist rides today, have been wild caught, although the number is difficult to validate.

Myth 5: Tourists demand elephant rides

Many tourists see elephant rides as the highlight of their holiday. However, this wish often stems from a lack of awareness of the abuse involved. As soon as they become aware of the suffering caused by elephant rides and shows, their enthusiasm quickly wanes.

Informed tourists who love animals are unlikely to want to ride an elephant or visit an elephant show. Raising their awareness is crucial. Tour operators and travel agencies are perfectly placed to inform

A desire to see elephants is of course perfectly understandable. Fortunately, there are opportunities for people to see elephants in their natural habitat. Such breath taking opportunities, responsibly offered, are highly appreciated by tourists.



Great news!

TUI Nederland removed elephant rides and shows from their range of travel choices in 2010. Since then more and more tour operators are following suit. By presenting their customers with well-founded reasons for stopping the rides, they converted to elephant-friendly tours – where elephants can roam in natural habitats. They gained their customers' support for their decision by explaining their reasons based on the suffering caused to the elephants. These tour operators, through liaison with their local partners, now offer elephant-friendly alternatives. These allow people to encounter these wonderful animals responsibly and humanely.

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- We are** World Animal Protection.
- We end** the needless suffering of animals.
- We influence** decision makers to put animals on the global agenda.
- We help** the world see how important animals are to all of us.
- We inspire** people to change animals' lives for the better.
- We move** the world to protect animals.